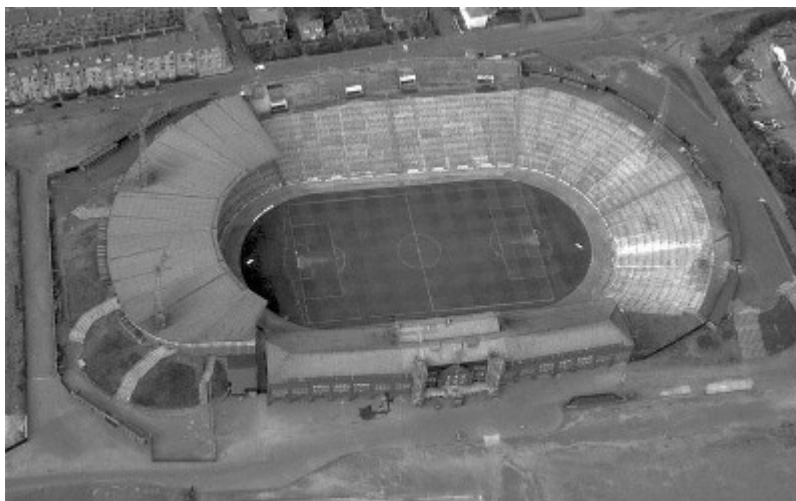


## Opening Nights: Hampden Park



The monstrous Hampden Park

Even now, almost forty years since the first meeting was held, it still seems astonishing that Glasgow Tigers called the massive Hampden Park their home. The world famous football stadium could hold crowds nearing 150,000 and it was something of a sensation when the news broke that the Tigers were moving in.

The club's home at White City was under imminent threat of development and a new track was required. Promoter Les Whaley explained how Hampden became the venue of choice:

"We had to think of the future. White City may well have a motorway running slap through its middle in two or three years from now, so when the Queen's Park football directors seemed willing to have speedway at their place we jumped at the chance."

The venue was so large that immediate concerns were expressed about the likely atmosphere at the meetings. Whaley tried to counter those worries:

"Hampden can take over 140,000 spectators and already some people are saying that initial speedway crowds there of, say, five or six thousand, would be 'lost' on the terracing. Our idea will be to concentrate the fans in sections for a start and nobody needs to get wet. There's seating accommodation for 14,000. In any case the bikes should fill the Hampden arena with plenty of atmosphere."

Tigers' big rivals the Monarchs were by now operating at nearby Coatbridge, but their boss Ian Hoskins was unconcerned by the track opening.

"I'm delighted at the move. Now Edinburgh Corporation, having seen Glasgow lead the way, may reconsider their decision not to allow speedway at the new Commonwealth Games stadium being built on the old Meadowbank site. If they did, we would have speedway on the really grand scale in this country. It would undoubtedly work wonders for the sport."

Hoskins' delight may not have been unrelated to the fact he was actually a silent partner in the Glasgow promotion. A jealousy guarded secret for most of the sixties to ensure that the Tigers/Monarchs rivalry could be emphasised to the max.

The Monarch's skipper Dougie Templeton had mixed feelings on the opening of the new track:

"This should be a fillip for the sport in Scotland, but I must say I'm not exactly rubbing my hands in anticipation of the first night I ride there as a Monarch. It's about 20 years since I've seen the stadium and I'm wondering if we'll be lost in it. It doesn't help riders to see only a handful of people on the big, wide open spaces of a stadium. My own feeling is that I think I've got to produce the stuff when there are lots of people watching and Hampden may be pushed to provide that sort of atmosphere, even if Monarchs and Tigers manage to pull in nine or ten thousand. That's something that remains to be seen."

The first Hampden meeting was scheduled for the Friday the 4th of April 1969, with Coatbridge the intended opponents in a 'Champagne Derby' clash. Predictably, the Scottish weather interfered with the track construction and the opening was delayed by a week. The opponents changed as well, Coatbridge were already committed to racing at Wolverhampton that night, so Glasgow took on King's Lynn in a British League match instead.

Charlie Monk won the first race in a time of 74.8 with team mate Willie Templeton following him home to give the Tigers the best possible start. As with many opening nights, the track condition deteriorated throughout the night and Jim McMillan won heat 12 in the considerably slower 81.4.

Top man for the Tigers was Russ Dent who scorched to 11+1 from four to become the first maximum scorer at the new track. His maximum hopes looked dashed as he lay in third place after two laps had been completed in heat 13. Over the last lap and a quarter he managed to overhaul both Stars' riders to complete a memorable individual performance.

### **Glasgow 49**

(Russ Dent 11, Charlie Monk 11, Jimmy McMillan 9, Willie Templeton 7, Oyvind S. Berg 6, Alf Wells 3, Bobby Beaton 2)

### **King's Lynn 29**

(Terry Betts 9, Malcolm Simmons 8, Clive Featherby 4, Howard Cole 3, Pete Bradshaw 2, Allan Brown 2, Alan Belham 1)

The opening night was almost memorable for all the wrong reasons for one local copper. He was on the track, ironically lecturing some youngsters on the dangers of sitting on the safety fence, while the referee was just about to start one of the heats. The intervention of one alert member of the track staff prevented what could have been a nasty incident.

Charlie Monk, usually a man of few words, expressed the hope that track conditions would improve in later meetings:

"The track needs a month or so to bed down but when that happens the speeds here should be really something."

Visiting star Terry Betts was mightily impressed with the facilities:

"I have raced all over the world, but it is great at Hampden. The stadium really has something and it brings out an extra effort from everyone."

Home rider Alf Wells was also in approval:

"It's fabulous! More like a luxury hotel than a speedway dressing room. They even have under-floor heating. It's lovely!"

The contemporary press reports that a crowd of 15,000 attended the opening meeting, though sadly it didn't last and crowds of around 3,000 were typical for most of the season.

The Tigers used Hampden Park until 1972, racing in front of ever-dwindling crowds. Those initial concerns about the atmosphere proved well-founded as the stadium was ridiculously over sized for the crowds the speedway attracted.

The stadium, now all-seated and modernised, is still used for football and will be used in the Commonwealth Games in 2014.

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